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Silent Voices: Interpretations of Gender-based Violence in Poile Sengupta's *Mangalam*

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Abstract:

Patriarchy is a system of social organization in which men hold primary power despite their inherent sympathy towards women. In this structure, both men and women are bound within complex relations shaped by power dynamics. This process of dehumanizing women perpetuates a culture of entitlement, where men feel justified in treating women as possessions rather than equals. It fosters an environment that normalizes violence, contributes to the perpetuation of gender-based discrimination, and strengthens patriarchy. Violence against women within families creates a web of injustice and exploitation. Thus, the family has become a site of exploitation, oppression and tragedies. The present play under study portrays diverse female characters and the emotional and physical toll they experience, the playwright humanizes the victims of violence, exhibits their stoicism and elicits empathy from the audience.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Violence, Gender-based discrimination, Exploitation.

Patriarchy is a system of social organization in which men hold primary power despite their inherent sympathy towards women. In this structure, both men and women are bound within complex relations shaped by power dynamics. Consequently, a woman finds herself navigating a delicate balance of power within this framework. The imbalance of power within familial relations can foster an environment of competition, inequality and self-preservation, which may further reinforce the patriarchal structure. As Gerda Lerner remarks:

The connectedness of women to familial structures made any development of female solidarity and group cohesiveness extremely problematic. Each individual woman was linked to her male kin in her family of origin through ties which implied specific obligations. Her indoctrination from early childhood on emphasized her obligation not only to make an economic contribution to the kin and household but also to accept a marriage partner in line with family interests. (219)

Violence against women within families creates a web of injustice and exploitation. In many societies, a family is considered the fundamental unit of social structure, where individuals are meant to find love, support, and security. However, behind closed doors, this sanctuary can become a breeding ground for various forms of violence, especially against women. The play sheds light on issues such as the unequal standard of purity, innocence and virginity for men and women in a marriage, where a husband can be an infidel causing continuous torture and abuse for a wife. Sometimes young girls may become the subjects of abuse, and molestation, violating their trust and causing long-lasting

emotional and psychological scars. This process of dehumanizing women perpetuates a culture of entitlement, where men feel justified in treating women as possessions rather than equals. It fosters an environment that normalizes violence, contributes to the perpetuation of gender-based discrimination, and strengthens patriarchy. Thus, the family has become a site of exploitation, oppression and tragedies.

The eponymous title of the play accurately reflects the harsh realities that many Mangalam face within the confines of the family. Through interrogation, the present study asserts that marriage led women to experience various forms of suffering, even metaphorical death. Therefore, family dynamics can be the basis for physical and emotional abuse directed at women. The very people who should provide love and support may become perpetrators of violence, resulting in a profound loss of trust, security and emotional well-being. Consistent exposure to abuse can undermine a woman's spirit, self-worth, and overall sense of self-esteem, developing a sense of slow death of a woman's identity and happiness.

Poile Sengupta, also known as Ambika Gopalkrishnan, is a prominent dramatist in the Indian contemporary "Theatre of Protest". Her plays prominently feature and place women at the centre of the stage. She makes a remarkable effort to expose various forms of women's exploitation through her expressive and creative writings. Her works also highlight the intrinsic relationship between patriarchy and violence. Patriarchy continues to exist, thrive, and dominate culture precisely because it employs violence to suppress its counterpart. Violence against women's psyche and body manifests in multiple forms, both visible and invisible, inflicting irreparable damage upon the victims. Her writings reflect

that the consequences of violence can be more damaging and long-lasting when the perpetrator is a family member or a relative.

Sengupta debut full-length play, *Mangalam* (1993), garnered widespread critical acclaim and recognition for its universal theme. Sengupta investigates the theme of forms of violence against women within the family sphere in the play. The play offers a deep insight into social norms and cultural practices surrounding these issues. The play challenges the notion of purity and virginity as concepts of morality in a phallocentric society that scrutinizes its women. The titular character, Mangalam, had already passed away when the play began. She was a mother of five children and the wife of Dorai. In the introduction to the play, Poile herself says,

Play is about family politics, seen through the perspective of women. The play deals with serrated relationships behind ostensibly normal households, whether in small town in Southern India of the 1960s, or in a modern cosmopolitan family. It is about vulnerabilities of women across all strata of society, and in varied households, and the tenderness and spirit that is so often brutally suppressed. (Sengupta 01)

The play is structured as a play within a play, divided into two acts. There are two different families in two acts. The Act 1 is set in a rural background where a middle-class Tamil Brahmin family lives, while Act 2 represents a well-educated sophisticated family who lives in an urban arena. Despite their different living standards, perspectives, and societal positions, the plight of women in both the families is the same. The actors retain their names in Act 2 as well but the scenes and situations change. Sengupta purposefully employs this sameness to demonstrate that violence against women is persistent. She

explains, "The device is used as a means to lend perspective to an issue. But in *Mangalam*, I have used the same actors in both acts as an indication that nothing really changes. The sameness of it all, to me, is deeply disturbing" (*Mangalam* 1).

Though the protagonist of the play, *Mangalam*, is not physically present in either act, yet her presence permeates the dramatic action. When the play begins, the eponymous character *Mangalam* is already dead, but other characters' memories, references and comments provide flesh and blood to the deceased woman. The first act takes place in *Mangalam's* house, depicting her devastating marriage to *Dorai* and her long sufferings. Her death provides the basic ground on which much of the action of Act 1 is based. Thus, she is absent but present throughout the entire action. At the first instance though the reason of *Mangalam's* death is not mentioned anywhere in the play, yet it is suggested that she may have intentionally taken her life by swallowing sleeping pills. She is subjected to physical violence and abuse throughout her life. Studies show that physical violence is the most explicit form of violence. Her experiences reflect the stark reality of our social system in which many women endure domestic violence.

Mangalam's father had arranged her marriage with *Dorai* in secret and haste due to undisclosed reasons. *Dorai* was the son of a poor priest. *Mangalam's* wealthy father, *Ramachandra Iyer*, did everything to help *Dorai*—securing him a job, supporting his sister's wedding, and even aiding his father during his illness. As a result, he attained a certain level of authority and control over *Dorai's* life and as a result, *Dorai* agreed to marry *Mangalam*. *Dorai* and his father literally perceived this marriage as the arrival of the goddess of wealth into their home.

After three months of marriage, Dorai discovered that Mangalam had been pregnant with someone else's child at the time of their marriage. Both Mangalam and Dorai saw themselves as victims of the situation. Due to the class difference and a sense of betrayal, Dorai began to despise Mangalam and sought revenge. Her husband dominated her life and inflicted various forms of torture upon her. Mangalam, bound in a loveless marriage, endured tears and suffering, as was witnessed by her daughter-in-law, Revathy. She was bound to a husband who hated her. This abuse may stem from a warped notion of chastity, because of which she was blamed and punished for perceived infidelity. She was tormented to such an extent that she ultimately took her life and liberated herself from her agonising partner. He slandered her even after her death.

The reason for her death and sufferings gradually reveals itself when the hidden truth about her elder son Sriram's father comes to light. The truth, which she had kept secret for thirty-one years to save her sister's marriage consequently led to her facing hatred from her husband. Dorai condemned his wife in front of everyone, saying; "She wouldn't tell me who the father was. First, I used to ask her softly, sweetly. She wouldn't tell me. Then I beat her. She stayed quiet. She wouldn't even cry out in pain. She was so obstinate that... Then it became a game to see how could take it out of her (pause). She never told me" (*Mangalam* 121).

Mangalam's son, Mani, finds a letter in their ancestral home that reveals Sriram as the son of Thangam's husband. With this, the audience also learns that Mangalam was a victim of child sexual abuse at the hands of her intoxicated brother-in-law. The violence she suffered physically at a tender age left psychological scars on her, haunting her for a lifetime. According to research, trauma stemming from childhood sexual abuse can be

more devastating to its victim than any other form of violence. After her marriage, the prolonged abuse she experienced due to her manic and violent husband further deeply affected her psychological well-being.

Sengupta employs the device of a chorus of female voices in the play to comment on the plight of women in Indian society. By employing this technique, the playwright gives prominence to the pervasive and persistent difficulties faced by women throughout their lives. The female chorus serves as a constant reminder of the struggles that women face at every stage of life; “Women die many kinds of deaths; men do not know this” (*Mangalam* 102). This approach allows the audience to empathize with the characters and understand the broader societal context, enabling them to relate to the character's experiences on a deeper level. With repeated comments on the plight of women, the chorus underscores the need for change and social development. The device acts as a collective voice, meditating on the shared experiences and grievances faced by women in Indian society. The female voices state, “In a woman’s mind, small is significant. Her life is made up of threads” (*Mangalam* 107). Through their commentary, the chorus stimulates the audience to question the existing attitudes and norms that contribute to the suppression and marginalization of women.

In portraying the complex tapestry of violence against women, the narrative shifts from a rural to an urban setting. Through an analysis of this transformation, we observe the development and differences in women’s responses to inflicted violence. The second act begins with a discussion between siblings Sumati and Suresh about the play they had watched the previous night. Their mother, Thangam, also joins their discussion. During their conversation, Sumati complains about the biased treatment she receives from her

mother in comparison to her brother, Suresh. Although the family is sophisticated and educated, residing in an urban area, the central character faces prejudice as a girl child in her home. Even though these female characters are educated, economically independent, and have a modern outlook, they face various forms of violence. However, they respond differently as compared to the women of the first act to abuse, exploitation, adultery, and infidelity. The actors of the first act become the main characters in the second act and discuss Act 1. Both acts represent the sameness between literature and life, past and present, urban and rural.

In Act 1, the fictional character Mangalam was a victim of sexual abuse and domestic violence, and Sumati is the audience. While in Act 2, Sumati herself becomes the victim of molestation. The playwright carries forward the concept of women's molestation and abuse in this act as well. Sengupta intentionally uses the technique of a play within a play to show the similarity between stage life and real life, the timelessness and perpetual nature of violence against women. The characters who discuss problematic issues of violence against women also become victims of gendered violence in Act 2. The dramatist intentionally uses the play-within-a-play technique to depict the persuasiveness of violence against women irrespective of time, economic and educational background, and urban and rural scenarios. In both cases and situations, the family is the chief perpetrator that inflicts violence on women.

In the preface of the play, Sengupta says, "It (the device) is used as a means to lend perspective to an issue. But in 'Mangalam,' I have used the same actors in both 'plays' as an indication that nothing really changes; the sameness of it all, to me, is deeply disturbing" (Sengupta 01). She uses the same theme and the same actors to suggest the repetition of

incidents of violence against women. In the first act, the central character Mangalam dies after long suffering at the hands of her husband. In Act 2, Sumati suffers at the hands of her uncle and fiancé. Poile Sengupta in the introduction to the play says;

The play deals with serrated relationships behind ostensibly normal households, whether in a small town in southern India of the 1960s, or in a modern cosmopolitan family, perhaps in Chennai. The first speaks in Tamil, the second uses English at home as many upper-class urban Indians do, but this play is not about language. It is about the vulnerability of women across all strata of society and in varied households, and the tenderness and spirit that is so often brutally suppressed. (*Mangalam* 01)

The characters Sumati, Usha, Revathy and Chitra underscore emotional and psychological violence. Usha and Revathy, as daughters-in-law, grapple with emotional manipulation and constant criticism from their in-laws. Once the marriage is solemnized, the daughter-in-law often faces unequal treatment within her new household. The predicament faced by daughters-in-law is a poignant reality that often goes unnoticed or unaddressed in many traditional patriarchal households. The dowry system has deep historical roots in our culture. The daughter-in-law often finds herself at the receiving end of dowry demands. These demands not only place an enormous financial burden on the bride's parents but also preserve the notion that a woman's worth is tied to material possessions. While she enters as an equal partner, she is frequently relegated to the role of a domestic helper. She may find herself trapped in a cycle of subjugation where her individuality and aspirations are suppressed.

Sumati an alternative name for Mangalam, is the main character in the second act. She is an independent girl who has recently joined college as a lecturer. From their discussion, it appears that she is conscious of women's conditions and their subordinate place in society. She thoughtfully comments on the plight of women and has her own identity with a feminist stance. She comprehends her mother: "A woman who allows herself to be soft, who relinquishes her weapons...well she gets chewed up, doesn't she? I know it's a terrible expression, but then it's a terrible state to be in" (*Mangalam* 148-149). She becomes the victim of molestation at the hands of someone closely associated with her family. Her behaviour and reluctance towards Vikram's proposal indicate that she has faced violence in her childhood as well. She has grown up as a sensitive girl who rebukes her brother, Suresh, for his immoral attitude towards girls. In her childhood memories, she remained neglected while her brother received all her mother's affection. The playwright represents a picture of our society where boys are preferred over girls. She yelled at her mother, Thangam, saying, "You brought me up efficiently, correctly, but without a soul" (*Mangalam* 131).

From an early age, a girl child often experiences prejudice and inequality as compared to boys. They internalized their subordinate position since childhood; it gets ingrained in their psyche. There is a set of gendered expectations that dictate women to be self-sacrificing. The play examines the various ways in which societal norms enforce and perpetuate the subordination of women. These harmful stereotypes perpetuate the belief that women are inferiors. Sengupta also explores the psychological aspects that contribute to the acceptance of violence by women. After Sumati's engagement to someone from a wealthy family, she went to meet him, but he was violent towards her. The play ends with

another scene of gendered violence when her uncle Nari, finding her alone in the garden tries to molest her. Nari's son, Vikram, steps forward to save her, shows a ray of hope as he is different from other male characters in the play.

The character of Suresh in the play has little respect for women and perceives his elder sister as inferior to him. He is driven by a distorted mindset shaped by gender-biased societal norms. He engages in numerous affairs with his girlfriends but he never establishes a meaningful, serious commitment with any of them. They are merely objects of pleasure for him, used for temporary gratification. The consequences of Suresh's behaviour become evident when a heartbroken girl, devastated by his betrayal, calls him on his phone and tearfully recounts the story of his deception to his elder sister. Upon hearing about her brother's wickedness, his sister Sumati yells at him, "So that means that the moment a woman doesn't fit into the category of being a mother or a sister, she's baggage (with a look at her mother); sexual baggage (*Mangalam* 129). Suresh's ideology that a man can have multiple affairs without consequences is shaped equally by the phallocentric society, dual moral policies and unequal upbringing by his mother. Regrettably, this skewed perspective contributes to his inability to cultivate lasting and meaningful relationships with women.

Thangam, the mother of Sumati and Suresh, is deceived by her husband, Sreeni, and faces infidelity in her marital relationship. One day, while cleaning, she finds a letter in a book and inquires her son if it belongs to him. From this letter, she discovers that her husband has a secret and serious affair with someone. Her daughter Sumati respects Sreeni and believes he is a good husband, who allows her wife to grow by providing her financial security. Thangam behaves abnormally after reading his secret letter. She is anxious but

cannot tell anybody about her husband's deception. In many cultures, women hold traditional patriarchal beliefs to save their husband's prestige that serves as barriers and come in the form of violence to push modern women behind.

Poile Sengupta herself commenting on the relevance of the theme says, "The issue it deals with remains pertinent today. Even while our rapid economic growth offers financial independence to an increasing number of women, domestic violence and sexual abuse of the girl child persist in Indian society" (*Mangalam* 1). There exists gender inequality and power dynamics between men and women, which invariably manifests itself in various forms of violence against women. Sengupta delves deep into the causes of these issues and explores multifaceted forms of violence against women in the play and offers possible solutions. The consequences of violence manifest themselves in various ways, including trauma, psychological distress, and even death. The play serves as a powerful platform to critically examine and to deconstruct the prevalent issues of social attitude, cultural norms and power dynamics that contribute to the perpetuation of violence against women. By portraying diverse female characters and the emotional and physical toll they experience, the playwright humanizes the victims of violence, exhibits their stoicism and elicits empathy from the audience. In the guise of the playwright herself, the female chorus in the play comments:

As for women, the gods said
let them be strong-rooted, like trees.
For it is they who shall hold
the ends of the world together. (*Mangalam* 151)

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